

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 6, February 2005

An Outward-Looking Orientation

Among the most challenging yet vital aspects of working towards the advancement of a cluster is for the Bahá'ís to develop the capacity to reach out to the wider society. In most countries, the institute process has been established, and individual believers are being mobilized to put their training into practice by starting core activities. However, unless the friends learn how to attract interested souls to these activities, growth is not possible.

In many parts of the Bahá'í world, we are beginning to witness “a variety of well-conceived and imaginative means” that create opportunities for an ever-growing number of people to pray with us, study the Word of God with us, have their children participate in our classes, and share our community life. In this manner, they are attracted and begin to drink from the life-giving waters of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Many are transformed by the experience and enlist under His banner.

Most efforts to reach out are a result of the initiative and dedicated endeavors of individual believers. The following are a few examples of how some Bahá'ís in Western countries are showing “courage and imagination” in involving others in core activities.

Inviting Individuals to Study Circles—France

A married couple in **France** stopped in the town of Aix-en-Provence on their way home from vacation. They shared a report on their effort to invite individuals to study circles.

We returned from our holidays to Corsica and we made a stop in Aix....we spoke about our common passion for more than twenty years, teaching the Cause of God. We wondered why people whom we encountered seemed not very receptive, and how to give them the opportunity to also benefit from what we felt had transformed our own lives. One part of the answer is known by all Bahá'ís today: invite them to participate in the core activities of the Five Year Plan; but how to propose it to them? An idea came to us: it all hinges on the presentation, which ought to be dignified. We immediately decided to telephone a couple living in Aix, who for some years were open to the Bahá'í ideas. I proposed to them over the telephone to come to our hotel as soon as possible, because we had something very important to tell them.

They accepted and came that same evening. While having tea, we explained to our guests that Bahá'ís everywhere in the world are developing training institutes in the form of study circles. The participants study the teachings of God together, the most powerful remedy for the sufferings overwhelming humanity. Our friends were very impressed by the extent of this project on a global scale. We said to them how pleased we were to inform them that the Bahá'í training institute is also carrying out activities here in Aix-en-Provence and a study circle for Ruhi Institute Book 1 “Life of the Spirit” was going to start soon, and that we had thought of them to take part in it.

We then gave them the booklet of our institute, which they appreciated very much. Before departing, we arranged to meet to view together the “Building Momentum” cassette, which shows how much people have been transformed by the study

circles, devotional meetings and children's classes. A few days later, our friends were overwhelmed after seeing the cassette and enrolled in the study circle. Encouraged by this experience, we decided to invite people who had never heard about the Bahá'í Faith to a devotional meeting or to take part in a study circle. In such manner, we have successfully continued to connect with people as diverse as the doctor who came to treat my wife, one of the people in charge of the hotel, and the employee of the pharmacy who came to deliver an exercise bicycle. To date, eight of these people registered to take part in the study circle, which begins next weekend.

In a subsequent email, the International Teaching Centre was informed that the study circle in Aix-en-Provence had its third session with nine participants. Further, the couple who had been informed about the study circle recently organized a devotional gathering in their home.

Seizing Opportunities among Friends, Family, Neighbors, and Co-workers—Italy

A high school teacher in *Italy* created a program for her students.

I spend most of my time with my students, so they are my friends, my co-workers, and my neighbors. Every year in the Italian schools, many teachers do projects for their students and I thought I would do a project for my students in order to start a "study circle" with Ruhi Institute Book 1. This project had a precise title, purpose, target, and contents. The title was "The Spiritual Dimension of Human Beings." The purpose was to help young people understand their spiritual reality and purpose of their life in this world; and the content was reflection on the life of spirit, the necessity of praying, and life after death. The project was inserted in the program description of every school subject and various projects elaborated by several teachers of the class.

During the class council meeting, when the Headmaster, all teachers, and the representatives of the students and their parents were present, I introduced and explained the project. Some people asked for explanations, and after further discussion, the project was agreed upon by all. I then introduced it to my students. I spoke to them about the spiritual reality of man, the purpose of his creation and life after death....

They were very interested in these subjects; most of them accepted the presentation with a great enthusiasm and I told them that a written application and the permission of their parents were required to attend this project. I involved two of my classes, and we started two study circles at the beginning of February, one with 12 students and the other with 13 students (17 to 18 years old). One study circle was on Mondays from 2:00 to 4:30 p.m. and the other on Tuesdays from 1:30 to 4:00 p.m.—after lessons.

The place of our meetings was in a classroom, so I tried to make it suitable for our study circle, with a joyful, pleasant and friendly atmosphere. Every time, we started by reading a passage from the Writings, poetry, or other writings about man and his relation with God. After this, we read some sections from Book 1, did exercises, shared our understanding and our experiences, and then we had an artistic break (some students read their poetry, sometimes they painted a wonderful picture, or told an important story). After the break, we continued with other sections of the book. At the end, we had a cake or some sweets and chocolates.

During a teacher-parents meeting, some mothers of these students thanked me for the spiritual care that I had taken of their children. One of them said, “Nobody cares about young people and their spiritual life, you have been so fantastic in doing this.” Another said, “My daughter is so happy when she comes back home from this spiritual course and she tells me everything and reads the pages that you share with them and I become happy, too.”

In one of our meetings, during the artistic time period, I asked the participants to write their feelings about another participant and one of them wrote a very beautiful message to all of the others about the knowledge they were gaining about their soul through this fantastic spiritual study.

In June we finished our study circles and the participants were very sad because they wanted to continue. I told them it was possible to continue with other Ruhi Institute books, as there are seven books in total.

At the end, I gave them a certificate of attendance, so they had a credit mark and this certificate as an integral part of their school papers.

It has been a very positive and wonderful experience. The young people who have participated in these study circles have expressed joy in knowing Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and learning about His teachings.

Attracting the Hearts through Devotional Gatherings—United States

The following is the report of a devotional gathering that began as an individual initiative by a believer in the *United States* who had completed a course using Ruhi Institute Book 1.

I just wanted to let you know that my first devotional gathering is scheduled for June 9th. I have handed out 20 invitations so far in the neighborhood, and have 10 more to go. Because there are more than 30 people I’d like to invite to each devotional, I am doing it in stages and will repeat the same theme next Wednesday, June 16th, for the next group of 30 neighbors. Three neighbors have already said they are coming—one said he was agnostic and did not pray, but would still come. The theme for these first two gatherings is the same: prayers for America. This way, if some of the first group can’t come the first Wednesday, I’ll invite them to the second one.

I saw my neighbor this morning...who was invited by another neighbor to the devotional (she was walking her dog right in front of my house as I was doing some early morning window washing outside). She confirmed that she was definitely coming tomorrow night, and also asked if she could invite one of her friends “who is very soulful.” Of course I said yes, yes, yes....isn’t this amazing! This is a person who was not directly invited because I didn’t have either her phone number or address and now she ends up inviting someone else too! Although I have always thought that many of my neighbors were potentially very receptive and special souls (so many are schoolteachers), this just brings home a really strong example that I must always remember—people are hungering for spiritual connection; they are, in fact, desperate for it, just as we were when we were lucky enough to connect with Bahá’ís and find Bahá’u’lláh. It made me embarrassed when she expressed such thanks that I had said of course, invite your friend, that would be wonderful, all are welcome. (Little did she know I was the one feeling so grateful!) Another lesson (and I dare anyone to conduct their own experiment about receiving assistance): it is absolutely true beyond any doubt that if we will

just take one step forward, as a result of our immersion in this institute process, all the assistance we can possibly handle will rush to amplify our puny efforts, and forces unseen will move things around in the right way to get souls connected to find Bahá'u'lláh. And this small example is probably nothing compared to what can happen when a soul gains more practical experience and learns from others in the cluster. As you can see, I am totally awed by the power of the institute process. After all these years, nothing I have experienced being a Bahá'í, either personally or collectively, comes close to comparing with the effect of it. The spiritual enkindlement and grounding it produces, coupled with all the practical steps and the sharing of learning, just make it so natural to proceed in teaching.

My goal is to find from these two gatherings neighbors who will begin a study class of Book 1, either here or at the Bahá'í Center. Connecting to the Word of God directly (rather than teachers) has been something I have always strongly upheld all my Bahá'í life, and now, with the institute process, we have a way to do this without just leaving people on their own with stacks of books, or hoping that the community deepening is on some topic that helps confirm a new soul, or developing pseudo-clergy/mentor relationships with souls that are not appropriate and not empowering. Yá Bahá'u'l Abhá! Even though I am totally convinced there will be souls from these two gatherings who will want to study the Faith, if that does not happen immediately, I will just continue getting people together and inviting more new people until it does happen. Some other interesting things so far about this experience:

- Most of the people invited have asked if they could bring something, showing some desire to contribute. I have suggested they bring some prayer or Writing, as indicated on the flyer. But, I am going to think more about this because this might be a clue to something—that allowing people to contribute to the gathering in some way, if they ask, even if it is an initial gathering, may be more important than I thought.
- Women have appeared to be more receptive, perhaps because a woman is doing the inviting, but we'll wait and see what happens.
- Three people have said almost the same thing to me (in slightly different words) that there has never been anything like this ever in the neighborhood and said it in a way to mean that they thought this was wonderful! They perceived even the idea of getting people together on a spiritual basis as something very innovative and positive...isn't that interesting?
- The reason I have met so many of my neighbors is because I have this little dog that I walk twice a day around this whole area. It has provided me with tremendous opportunities to see my neighbors and their children, stop and chat each day just a bit, wave and smile, or respond to some friendly exchange with them. So I have a lot of opportunities to thank this pesky little Irish terrier for providing. I highly recommend these walks around the neighborhood to anyone who doesn't know their neighbors yet. I hardly knew anyone until after I got this dog.

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